

THIN AIR

By

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CAST: Bird - A tall, slender young woman (18-25 years old), wearing tights, a short black skirt, and an old sweatshirt.
A tightrope walker.

SET: A 2' x 2' wooden platform. A 5/8th inch thick rope stretches straight out from the front of the platform into the darkness of the audience. The platform is isolated by spotlights. The platform could also be simulated with lights, etc.)

TIME: The Present

THIN AIR

(A tall, slender woman wearing tights, a short black skirt, and an old sweatshirt stands atop a 2' x 2' platform. A 5/8th inch thick rope stretches straight out from the front of the platform into the darkness of the audience. The platform is isolated by spotlights.)

BIRD

One foot in front of the other, one step at a time. That's how you do it. You're standing way up here on a two foot square platform. The wire snakes out in front of you, gently swaying, trembling with anticipation. The straight and narrow as Pop calls it. The hot smell of popcorn, horse-sweat, and the tang of the big cats. Center ring looks like a target for high divers. Spotlights tunnel up through the smoke, striking sparks off the glitter on your suit. There's the dizzying mad rush of circus music, animals, and the roar of the crowd echoing around the top of the tent. You take a deep breath, focus, and step out.

Karl Wallenda was probably the best....I mean of all time. The Flying Wallendas, funambulists of the first order. Tightrope walkers extraordinaire. Of course there was Blondin back in the 1800's. He walked the Niagara Falls 14 times, a couple times with his manager on his back. Brave manager. My heroes were always the women. Miss Cooke, Lillian Lietzel, Josephine Berosini. And of course my favorite, Bird Millman from the '20s. You ever hear of her? She loved it you know. She'd run across that 36 foot wire like she was going to her wedding. My folks named me after her, Bird. Debuted when she was six years old. Soloed at twelve, then center ring for the Ringling Brothers. What I liked about Bird though was that she eventually flew the coop. Gave it up. Married her a Harvard graduate, quit the circus, and lived happily ever after. I think about her a lot. Never went down once. Tightrope walkers don't use the word fall. It's 'come down' or 'go down' ...or 'went down'. She never went down once and never went back. Bird's one of the very few that actually retired. I admire that...knowing when to quit.

I've always heard voices in my head. All my life. Not like martians or telepathy. I don't mean like that. I mean like..larger voices..calling me. To larger things. Bigger things. Telling me to pursue my dreams. And I have. 60 feet up on a five-eighths inch steel wire. Without a net. Cause that's what life's all about it. Isn't it? Living without a net? "Look Ma, no hands. " Death defying.

On January 30, 1962 in front of 6,000 people at the Shrine Circus in Detroit, the Wallenda family came down off the wire. Fell as you would say. They were doing their famous seven-person pyramid with 16 year old Delilah Wallenda on top. It was an act they had been doing since 1947.

Fifteen years. Dieter Schepp was the main under-stander. He was on the bottom of the pyramid with three others. They had two more on their shoulders and then little Delilah. All balanced on a five-eighth inch wire, less than two centimeters. Think about that. Think about the weight. All the support poles bent in towards the middle. Suddenly Dieter lost it. He was new to the act and he lost his balance pole. He shouted..."Ich kann nicht mehr halten!"...."I can't hold on anymore."

I was pretty much born on the wire. Born to fame Pop says. Born to live in the eye of the needle. Mom says that I never kicked when she was in the middle of an act. Like I knew. Like I was helping her balance there on the wire. It is amazing when you think of living your life on a twisted steel wire no thicker than your little finger. Karl Wallenda said "that wire is your life." Literally. My Gran used to call it "walking in glory". Alejandro, my husband, once said "it was like stepping into fire." Referring I think to the spotlights but meaning something not unlike religion. Faith. Like those fire-walkers. A matter of belief. Belief that your skin won't burn, blister and peel on the coals. Belief that you can do the impossible. Hubris. I looked hubris up in the Websters...exaggerated pride or self-confidence often resulting in retribution. I look things up so I'm sure, you know? I like things to be spelled out. Defined. Hubris. It's right next to hubcap.

You ever watch Wily Coyote and the Roadrunner? On Saturday mornings? My favorite was where the Coyote stretched this rope across a huge canyon and then frayed it down to a thread in the middle. "Meep, meep" here comes the Roadrunner straight across, no problem. So the Coyote gets mad and follows only to find the Roadrunner poised there at the middle with a pair of big scissors. Snip. The rope slowly falls away from under the old coyote but not from under the Roadrunner. It's suspended in the air. You can see the realization on Wily Coyote's face that it's impossible and then (falling wind sound).....splat. The coyote would set all these traps, like painting fake tunnels on the sides of cliffs, only to have the Roadrunner go right through. Old Wily would try to follow and...splat. Every time he'd try to do something he knew was impossible...whammo, splat.

I sometimes see the wire as the line between life and death. Before and after. Walking the edge. One step at a time. One foot in front of the other. Pretty much all wire-walkers understand in their subconscious that sooner or later they'll go down. Only in our hearts we don't believe it. We believe instead in grace...focus...will. Sometimes you start to slip up there and it seems like you

hold yourself on the wire purely by the force of your will. The strength of your will. Like Ghandi or Martin Luther King. They changed the face of the world through the force of their wills. It's what kept them balanced on their highwires and what's kept me balanced on mine...at least that's what I always believed. 'Till now. That was my illusion. See, Wily Coyote's mistake was believing in his illusion. Like my husband Alejandro. And me.

You probably won't believe this but it's not easy to find a highwire partner. Personal space takes on a whole new meaning up there. The first time I saw Alejandro Navarrra work the highwire I knew. His body straight and slender. Tempered, pliable steel forged in the fire of Mexican poverty. At the same time ethereal, elegant, old world. A proud man. He was the kind of man that would make the gods jealous. It was a beautiful thing to watch him. An intensity that made you forget there was a wire there at all. Just like he was walking in thin air. Or on water. We got married the next week right there on the wire in front of a wildly cheering Friday night Vegas crowd. He said he almost fell for me. You remember I told you I've done just about anything you can think of on the high-wire? Yep, that's right. Later that night....Kama Sutra at 60 feet. Talk about wired. Talk about focus. Standing naked on a thin steel strand over thin air watching my new husband coming towards me. The still air, the wire, and then him. When he put his hands on me and lifted me off the wire into his arms I felt my world shift and I suddenly had a new center of gravity. In him. It was no longer my force of will but his that kept me balanced. When he kissed me I felt like old Wily Coyote floating there in mid-air, the Grand Canyon way below my feet. Holding me up with just his lips. Tight-rope walkers tend to mate for life like cranes or eagles. There's a trust. A faith. Defying gravity together. Defying death. Maybe defying god. Hubris. Devine retribution.

When he went down...we didn't even have a year...when he went down...we were doing an outdoor show, see, and a gust of wind took him off. A small invisible push. The breath of a jealous god. Not two feet away from me. Like Michaelangelo's picture...in the Sistine Chapel? God and Adam. I always thought those two hands were reaching towards each other. Now I know they were falling away. I was just there...left hanging in the void...and there was nothing I could do..can do..and now I have this loss, this emptiness. For the first time in my life I've become unbalanced. And I don't know what to do. Cause, see, you might have thought it was a flight of fancy when I compared what I do on the wire...my feelings, my beliefs..to Mahatma

Ghandi. To some people that might seem frivolous. But it's everything to me. It's like an umbilical cord tying me to my family, my past, to life's meanings and mysteries. The wire has been my life. My path. When you're on the wire you know exactly where you are and where you're going. So why am I trembling? Talk to me Bird Millman. You knew when to quit. You knew when enough was enough. But god you must have missed it.

There's something I didn't tell you about when the Wallendas went down. Even though two of them were killed and Karl's son Mario was paralyzed for life, the rest of them were back on the wire in two days with a new act. Two days. Even little Delilah. It's a fact. It's legendary.....I always wanted to be legendary....and this is the second day. This is my second day. I know it's just a matter of stopping this trembling...a matter of finding my own center of gravity again....finding faith and will...a simple matter of one foot in front of the other.

THE END